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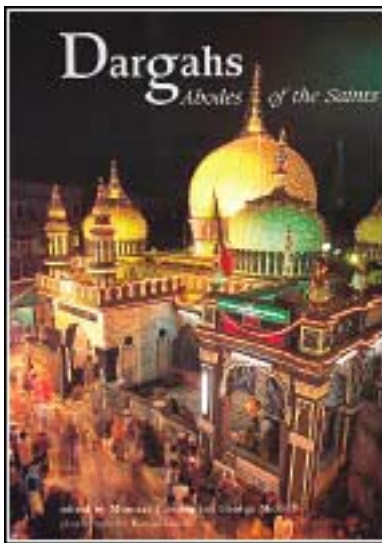
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## EXCERPTS: Preaching love and tolerance

By Ali S. Asani



*Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti, who lies buried in Ajmer, was one of the most revered sufis of India. Ali S. Asani writes about him and his admirers.*

Who was Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti and why has his dargah attained such pre-eminence? Although Muinuddin Chishti looms large in the history of Islam and Sufism in South Asia, we have, unfortunately, very little accurate information about him, because of an absence of reliable contemporary sources. Most of what we know is based on legend and hagiography that developed around his figure several centuries after his death. As a result, we know considerably more about the personality of Muinuddin as it was constructed over time through the veneration of successive generations of devotees than the actual Muinuddin of history. As we gingerly sift through legendary accounts to separate historical fact from pious fiction, certain basic information about him emerges.

A pious, modest Sufi Shaykh, whose family claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Muinuddin probably grew up in Sijistan, Iran. As a young man, he sold the property he had inherited and went to the Central Asian cities of Samarkand and Bukhara in search of spiritual instruction. In the course of his

extensive travels, he was initiated into the Chishti Sufi order by Shaykh Usman Harwani, eventually becoming his principal *khalifa*. Towards the end of the 12th century, Khwaja Muinuddin came to India, via Afghanistan, settling first in Delhi and later in Ajmer where he attracted a substantial following, acquiring a great deal of respect among residents of the city.

Khwaja Muinuddin apparently never wrote down his teachings in the form of a book, nor did his immediate disciples do so. Consequently, we have to rely on information transmitted through oral traditions and hagiographies concerning what he taught. A popular tradition asserts that Khwaja Muinuddin preached that his disciples should have "generosity like that of the ocean, mildness like that of the sun, a modesty like that of the earth". It is very likely that the central principles that became characteristics of the early Chishti order are based on his many teachings and practices. They lay stress on renunciation of material goods; strict regime of self-discipline and personal prayer; participation in *sama* as a legitimate means to spiritual transformation; reliance on either cultivation or unsolicited offerings as means of basic subsistence; independence from rulers and the state, including rejection of monetary and land grants; generosity to others, particularly through sharing of food and wealth; and tolerance and respect for religious differences.

Khwaja Muinuddin married late in life, dying seven years after his marriage at the age of 97 on Rajab 6, most probably in 1236. His two principal *khalifas*, Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar (d.1235) and Hamiduddin Savali (d. 1276), continued transmitting the teachings of their master through their disciples, leading to the widespread proliferation of the Chishti Sufi order in India. Among Qutbuddin's prominent disciples was Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar (the treasure-house of sugar) (d. 1265), whose *dargah* is at Pakpattan in Pakistan.

Fariduddin's most famous disciple was Nizamuddin Awliya (d. 1325), popularly referred to as Mahboob-i-Ilahi (God's beloved). His *dargah* is located in old Delhi from where his disciples branched out to establish *dargahs* in several regions from Sindh in the west to Bengal in the east and the Deccan in the south. With the development of an extensive network of Chishti *dargahs* all over the subcontinent, the Ajmer *dargah* took on the special distinction of being the 'mother' *dargah* of them all.

Notwithstanding his piety and charisma, as scholars have noted, Khwaja Muinuddin was not widely known during his lifetime. This would explain the absence of references to him in contemporary documents. However, as the Chishti Sufi order, which he is considered to have introduced to India, attained supremacy over other Sufi orders in the course of the 14th and 15th centuries, there was a great deal of interest in its origins. As a result, numerous legends developed around the founder of this influential order. Many of these legendary accounts also

highlighted his pioneering role in relation to the introduction of Islam into the region.

One such account in the 17th-century *Siyar al-Aqtab* records that while on a pilgrimage to Prophet Muhammad's tomb in Medina, Khwaja Muinuddin heard a voice from inside the tomb ordering him to go to Hindustan, specifically to Ajmer, to propagate Islam. The legend thus suggests that the tremendous popularity of Khwaja Muinuddin and that of Chishti masters who succeeded him is primarily due to the authority and blessings he is believed to have received from the Prophet himself.

### **Royal patronage**

Khwaja Muinuddin and the early Chishtis were vehemently against any close association with those in political power as they considered such contact to be detrimental to a person's moral and spiritual wellbeing. Ironically, by the early 14th century, the Chishti order began to rise to prominence precisely on account of the enormous royal patronage it was attracting. As Muslim rulers of Turko-Persian ancestry began to establish kingdoms in the subcontinent, they associated their own personal fortunes and those of their dynasty with that of the Chishti order.

Such patronage could strengthen their claims of legitimacy in the eyes of the local population and also bestow upon it spiritual blessings for continued prosperity and success. As a consequence, a pattern of growing political patronage of Chishti shrines emerged in many parts of northern India, from Gujarat to Bengal. Naturally the 'mother' *dargah* at Ajmer received a great deal of royal attention, all the more so due to its frontier location.

While the dynasties, both Muslim and non-Muslim, patronized the shrine at Ajmer, its most generous and loyal patrons were members of the Mughal dynasty who were firmly convinced that their worldly success was due to the blessings of the Chishti Shaykhs. As a result, not only did Mughal emperors bestow lavish endowments for the support of the *dargah* and sponsor several construction projects, they also actively involved themselves in its management by appointing its administrators and titular heads.

Akbar (r. 1556-1605), in particular, was an ardent devotee. *The Akbarnama* records that the emperor's interest in Khwaja Muinuddin and his *dargah* was first sparked when he heard some minstrels singing songs about the virtues of the holy man who lay asleep in Ajmer. He then resolved to make the annual pilgrimage to Ajmer during the time of the urs. In all, he undertook 14 pilgrimages to the shrine, several of them on foot. Two of these pilgrimages, those of 1568 and 1574, were made immediately after conquering Chittor and Bengal respectively.

Discussing his military successes with the historian Abd al-Qadir Badauni, Akbar remarked: "All this success has been brought through the Pir Muinuddin Chishti." Akbar's reverence for and devotion to the Chishtis increased significantly when Shaykh Salim Chishti, a descendant of Baba Farid Ganj-i-Shakar, correctly predicted the birth of his son and heir, Prince Salim. In gratitude, Akbar performed a pilgrimage to Ajmer, walking on foot all the way from Agra.

He also had his new capital city, Fatehpur Sikri, built near Salim Chishti's *khanqah* as a tangible way of symbolizing the close Mughal-Chishti alliance. During every visit to Ajmer, Akbar contributed generously to the shrine to sponsor several projects such as the building of a mosque and the renovation of the mausoleum. He also donated a large *deg*, or cauldron, to start the system of cooking and distributing food in quantity to pilgrims coming to the shrine.

Akbar's son Jahangir (r. 1605-27) was similarly devoted to the *dargah*, believing that he owed his very physical existence to the blessings of Khawaja Muinuddin. He lived in Ajmer for nearly three years, not only because it pleased him to be near the *dargah* (during this time he visited the shrine nine times), but also because he wanted to conduct a campaign against one of his most formidable opponents, Rana Amar Singh of Mewar. To commemorate his victory over the Rana, Jahangir performed a pilgrimage to the *dargah* on foot, distributing money on the way to the poor and the needy.

During another visit, he donated an enormous cauldron to cook food for 5,000 people, lighting the fire beneath it himself when it was first used. In 1616, he donated a gold railing with latticework that was installed around Khwaja Muinuddin's tomb. Jahangir's belief in the power of Khwaja Muinuddin was such that after his recovery from a serious illness, during which he had prayed at the shrine, he had his ears pierced and pearls inserted in them to symbolize his complete devotion to the Shaykh.

The emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1627-58) visited the *dargah* five times during his reign, always approaching it on foot. In fulfillment of a vow of thanksgiving he had made during a successful military campaign, Shah Jahan ordered the construction of a major congregational mosque at the *dargah*. Completed in 1637, the white marble mosque was unrivalled in beauty. In 1654, to celebrate the defeat of a rebellious local ruler, Shah Jahan ordered the construction of a large gateway to the shrine.

Shah Jahan's eldest daughter, Jahanara Begum (1614-81), was personally inclined to Islamic mysticism. A passionate devotee of Muinuddin Chishti, she wrote a well-known biography on him. In the appendix of this work, she recounts the details of her own pilgrimage to the shrine in 1643 and the mystical ecstasy that overcame her one evening while she was circumambulating the tomb. A generous

patroness, Jahanara had a pillared porch built in marble in front of the tomb. This porch is today appropriately called the Begumi Dalan, a name derived from her title, Begum Sahib.

With the collapse of the Mughal dynasty, the dargah at Ajmer lost stability in its royal patronage as various rival factions attempted to fill in the political vacuum left by the Mughals. It continued, however, to occupy the attention of various rulers, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, for patronage of the shrine was a useful means to securing the political loyalty of the local population.

*Mumtaz Currim is Lecturer in Indo-Islamic Architecture and religion at the University of Mumbai. Her master's dissertation on dargahs was presented at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of Londo.*

*George Mitchell is an architectural historian specializing in India.*

*Ali S. Asani is professor of the Practice of Indo-Muslim Languages and Culture at Harvard University.*

*This coffee table book focuses on some of the historically most significant dargahs (shrines) of saints in various parts of India.*

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